

ARTICLES

The Singers of Northern Russian Religious Verses (1)

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Before discussing the singers of North Russian folk religious verses (*dukhovnye stikhi*), it may be sensible to begin by characterizing not the singers but their songs. Russian folk religious verses are usually based on a Christian literary source: the Bible, a hagiographic tale, the life of a saint or an apocryphal text. The formal characteristics of the verses, composed at different periods, vary so widely that many Russian folklorists consider it impossible to try and group all popular religious verse together into a single folk genre [Nikitina 1993: 45-46]; some scholars suggest dividing *dukhovnye stikhi* into a separate system of genres parallel to the one used for traditional secular folklore [Selivanov 1995: 8-10, 57-59]. The older type of religious verse, known as “*starshie*,” are predominantly narrative in form, and in their poetic style close to the Russian *byliny* and folk ballads; the junior (“*mladshie*”) *dukhovnye stikhi*, sung mainly by the Old Believers,⁽²⁾ are lyrical in nature and frequently imitate literary verse. In the nineteenth century collectors recorded religious poetry in many provinces in the European part of the Russian Empire [Kireevskii 1848, Varentsov 1860, Bessonov 1861 - 1864]. In the twentieth century, especially the first half, hearing and recording *dukhovnye stikhi* was still possible in some remote rural areas of the country, but nowadays, although the tradition of performing religious verses lives on, it does so only in Old Believer communities.

In this article the focus falls on one particular area, the Russian North, and more specifically on those who sang the *dukhovnye stikhi*. Apart from references in works by nineteenth and twentieth-century ethnographers and folklorists the article draws primarily on archival material from the folklore collections of the Archive of the Karelian Research Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Petrozavodsk. This material relates to the period 1911-98.

The main bearers of folk religious poetry are usually said to be the *kaliki perekhozhie*, semi-professional, often blind or disabled itinerant singers, who sang *dukhovnye stikhi* in crowded places and asked for alms in return [Fedotov 1935/1991: 14-25]. However, this statement requires amplification when we refer to the situation in the North of Russia, the area in which *stikhi* were especially popular. In Olonets, Archangel and Vologda provinces, apart from the *kaliki*, religious verses were sung by the rural population, both Orthodox and Old Believers. Information about the singing of religious verse by North Russian peasants can be gleaned from the writings of various nineteenth-century folklorists and ethnographers [Barsov 1867; Maslov 1905: 13; Miller 1895: 27-28]. In addition, *dukhovnye stikhi* have been recorded from ordinary villagers by nineteenth and twentieth-century collectors on numerous occasions, with the overwhelming majority of twentieth-century variants being recorded from women. What were the relations between the *kaliki* and the peasantry in the North of Russia, how did villagers treat the itinerant singers and under what conditions did they take over their repertoire? These questions were almost entirely ignored by nineteenth-century ethnographers [Maksimov

1987: 450-473; Vereshchagin 1855: 362; Khrushchev 1901: 192-94]. What scanty data does exist can be supplemented by notes made by collectors and the reminiscences of peasants both found in the folklore collections of the Archive of the Karelian Research Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences (henceforth called the “KarRC Archive”).

The collection of religious verse, one of the fruits of the folklore expeditions organized by the Institute of Language, Literature and History of the KarRC, includes more than 260 texts covering almost the whole of the twentieth century, from 1911 till 1998. Some of these recordings come complete with comments on the manner of performance, the person from whom the singer had learnt the song and the particular conditions under which it was usually performed. Apart from this, notes about the *dukhovnye stikhi* and their bearers can be found in fieldwork reports and collectors’ journals. For instance, numerous comments on religious verses are to be found in collections 8 and 79, containing material from the expeditions to Zaonezh’e (the area to the north and east of Lake Onega) in 1940 and 1956.

Both types of verse, the general Russian (“*starshie*”) and the Old Believer (“*mladshie*”), were recorded by folklorists in the villages located along the eastern frontier of Karelia, in an area inhabited mainly by Russians, descendants of settlers who came from the Novgorod area.⁽³⁾ “*Starshie*” *stikhi* constitute the majority of the texts; the variants of this type (more than 180 recordings) constitute three quarters of the regional collection, whereas the Old Believer tradition of religious poetry is inadequately represented in the folklore collections of the KarRC Archive. There is not one mention of the manuscript codices of religious verse used by Old Believers in the folklorists’ diaries kept in the KarRC, though we know that in the Russian North such codices were not only carefully preserved in the twentieth century, but new ones were even being compiled.⁽⁴⁾ Most of the individual Old Believer songs are only found in the KarRC Archive in a single variant. Nor can we be sure that all the examples of “*mladshie*” *stikhi* were recorded from adherents of the Old Belief or those sympathetic to their views, since some (e.g. “The testament of a dying mother” [*Zaveshchanie umiraiushchei materi*]) were disseminated throughout the Russian North by the *kaliki perekhozhie* [KarRC Archive, coll. 27 № 184; coll. 79 № 726, 728], and may well have been adopted by the official Orthodox population from them along with other *stikhi*. What is more, Soviet collectors avoided asking performers point-blank about their religious affiliation, for fear of attracting their mistrust. And for their part, informants were usually far from willing to disclose the information. Several villagers refused categorically to sing religious verses in the presence of outsiders, or even their own neighbors [KarRC Archive, coll. 8 № 36; coll. 26 № 10]. Describing her expedition to Karelia in 1980, the scholar, S. E. Nikitina, who has studied folk religious verse, has remarked that “the ‘*stikhi*’ did not exist on the surface but were deeply concealed within the bearers’ consciousness, as though they were something that ought not to be made public (a characteristic comment would be: ‘I will sing and then I’ll be jailed, and taken away’)” [Nikitina 1993: 57].

It goes without saying that in the Soviet period ideology placed constraints on the collecting of *dukhovnye stikhi*. Organizing a special expedition was out of the question, though there were several expeditions that recorded *byliny* and ballads. *Dukhovnye stikhi* were only written down incidentally, if time permitted, and usually did not constitute the main aim of fieldwork. Quite often folklorists had no time to record the religious

verses and could do no more than note their existence; sometimes they would record one or two variants out of the five or six available [KarRC Archive, coll. 8 № 2, 21, 35; coll. 44 № 1].

Not all the religious verses in the KarRC Archive have attributions. For instance, the names of performers have not been recorded by I. M. and V. P. Durov, the amateur folklorists who gave the KarRC Archive thirty six texts of religious verses they had recorded between 1911 and 1935 in the Pomor'e area (along the White Sea coast) [KarRC Archive, coll. 27 № 176 – 82, 184 – 98; coll. 28 № 50 – 64, 124 – 25]. Some of these texts may have been transcribed directly from the *kaliki perekhozhie*, since one of the sections in I. M. Durov's manuscript is entitled "The beggars verses" ("*Stikhi nishchei bratii*"). Commenting upon the texts, Durov indicated that religious verses were "sung by the old inhabitants of Pomor'e during 'meetings,' that is, during the gatherings of old folk (men or women); by the *bespopovtsy* (priestless Old Believers) on feast days; or by beggars seeking alms in homes in the villages of Pomor'e" [KarRC Archive, coll. 27 № 184].(5)

I. M. Durov is probably the only twentieth-century collector in the KarRC Archive who had the opportunity to observe *kaliki perekhozhie* with his own eyes. When folklorists from Petrozavodsk arrived in Zaonezh'e the itinerant singers had already vanished. However memories of them were still fresh at that time, while the religious verses acquired from them were preserved in the memory of the local population for several decades.

It was women who were the primary singers of *dukhovnye stikhi* in the North of Russia in the twentieth century women. Songs recorded from middle-aged and elderly women constitute four fifths of all the texts in the local collection (about 200 variants). In all a mere twenty texts, including fragments and retellings, have been recorded from men.(6) Before their disappearance religious verses had become part of the sphere of female folklore genres for many reasons. Women's folklore is generally considered more conservative, and in the Soviet era women were much more pious than men. It may be that in the 1930s men were wary of performing *dukhovnye stikhi* about the saints, Christ and the Mother of God in the presence of folklorists, especially if the latter were under an obligation to promote atheism on the collective farm.

It is quite possible that in the nineteenth century men too sang religious verses, since in the Russian North there was a widespread prohibition on singing anything except *stikhi* during fasts (particularly in Lent). Religious verses were performed by many of the famous Northern Russian singers: T. G. and I. T. Riabinin, V. P. Shchegolenok, N. A. Remezov, F. A. Konashkov *inter alia*. The KarRC Archive contains evidence of verses performed by the whole family or by older relatives for the younger folk as they worked together at home [KarRC Archive, coll. 79 № 92]. Two songs were recorded from a married couple who used to sing together [KarRC Archive, coll. 79 № 1076, 1077]. But it was only women who had the kind of work that was traditionally specifically linked to the singing of verses. Before the Revolution and during the first decade thereafter, unmarried girls and in some cases married women would gather together in Lent to spin, and their meetings, spinning "bees," were usually accompanied by the choral singing of *dukhovnye stikhi* [Barsov 1867].(7) Many of the performers recorded by folklorists from the KarRC remembered the custom of singing religious verses during Lent [KarRC Archive, coll. 8 № 4, 98, 99; coll. 44 № 3; coll. 51 № 276; coll. 79 № 326, 433; coll. 80 № 33]. As a rule the art of performing *stikhi* was transmitted from older women to their younger

relatives along with the skills of spinning and weaving. Many performers told the KarRC collectors that they had learnt *dukhovnye stikhi* from their grandmother, mother, nurse or neighbor. For instance, when P. E. Popova from Niukhcha had finished singing the verse about the Ascension she remarked: “I got this song from my mother... In our family my mother sang this song on the eve of Palm Sunday” [KarRC Archive, coll. 126 № 27]. A. M. Isakova from Shueretskoe recalled: “The old women would all meet: ‘Children, let us teach you to sing *stikhi*’” [KarRC Archive, coll. 36/1 № 42].

Statements that the *dukhovnye stikhi* had been learnt from the *kaliki perekhozhie* are equally common. A. T. Shelonikova from Vygozero told collectors: “The beggars would arrive from Kargopol’. They’d ask for alms. They visited the houses (*po fateram khodiat*),(8) sat and sang. They stayed near the entrance, sat down on the bench and sang. The old women learnt their *stikhi* from them. The beggars would go around in groups of a dozen or so ...” [KarRC Archive, coll. 79 № 433].

A few performers of both kinds of *dukhovnye stikhi* (that is, both the “*starshie*” and the “*mladshie*”) recounted that either they or their relatives had learnt a particular song from beggars who had lodged in their house for a few days [KarRC Archive, coll. 79 № 726]. When T. A. Lepetukhina from the village of Lapino had finished singing the verse about Saint Paraskeva and the anchorite, she recalled that “the blind beggar Oprosim, who had sung this *stikh*, usually stayed in her grandmother’s house ... Other beggars also often came to spend the night at their house and sing *stikhi*” [KarRC Archive, coll. 79 № 751]. We should mention that, apart from religious verses, the repertoire of the *kaliki perekhozhie* also included ballads; it was normal for singers to lump them together and to call them both “*stikhi*” (with the stress on the first syllable). Both were often sung to the same melody or to one very similar. We can find comments following the texts of several ballads recorded in the Pudozh district by members of the 1940 expedition to the effect that the texts had been learnt by the singers from the *kaliki perekhozhie* [KarRC Archive, coll. 8 № 4a, 139, 235].

Sometimes after they had finished singing, performers would start recalling the *kaliki* who had also sung a particular spiritual verse, but without saying directly that the *stikh* had actually been learnt from them. When F. A. Konashkov finished the song about Saint Paraskeva and the anchorite, he suddenly began demonstrating how the *kaliki* would beg for alms after they had stopped singing: “And we glorify you, Christ the Lord! (And then the *kaliki* would ask for a few scraps).” (*I slavim Tebia, Khriste Bozhe! (I kusochkov i poprosiat kaliki)*). [KarRC Archive, coll. 15 № 35a]. The verse about the Ascension is also followed by a comment about the *kaliki* who sang it, which contains a typical begging formula, “for the sake of Christ the Lord, give us alms” (*Gospodi Khrista radi podaite milostinku*) [KarRC Archive, coll. 79 № 644], and one of the many variants of the verse about the two Lazarus brothers even incorporates this request into the text itself:

“Brother, please go to the blue sea
Brother, bring me a ladle of water.”
“The will is not mine but God’s.”
Lord Jesus, give us now some charity.

“*Skhodil by ty, bratets, ko sinu moriu,*
Prines by da bratets, kovshechek vody.”
“*Volia ne moia, volia Bogovaia.*”
Gospodi Isuse, nun’-ko milostyniu dai.

The text is followed by the comment: “with these final words they concluded the *stikh*, crossed themselves and asked for alms” [KarRC Archive, coll. 79 № 24].

Most of the evidence about the itinerant performers of religious verses refers to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These recollections, combined with the observations of pre-Revolutionary ethnographers, permit us to form an overview of the relations between the *kaliki perekhozhie* and the peasantry. Itinerant singers came to Northern Russian villages in twos and threes or in larger groups (known as an *artel'*) of about ten to twelve men. The resident population greeted them with sympathy and compassion. One of the earliest pieces of evidence about the way Northern Russian peasants treated the *kaliki* dates from the mid nineteenth century. According to the ethnographer Vereshchagin “villagers have respect for them, listen eagerly to their songs, try to please them and provide them with abundant supplies of food and all sorts of other stuff” [Vereshchagin 1855: 362]. A. I. Levina was the only performer recorded by the KarRC folklorists who expressed an overt dislike of *stikhi*; she used to “run away” so as not to have to listen to them, but she remembered this as a deviation from the ethical norms of behaviour, viewing it as a sin on her part: “May God forgive me, I didn’t like the *kaliki*” (*Kaliki eti, prosti Gospodi, ne nraivilis’ mne*) [KarRC Archive, coll. 36/1 № 38].

In the itinerant singers’ audience there would be children [KarRC Archive, coll. 145 № 41; coll. 79 № 648] as well as adults and old folk [KarRC Archive, coll. 79 № 433]. In warm weather the *kaliki* usually sang their *stikhi* beneath the windows of the peasant *izba* (wooden house), or else sitting on the front steps or just on a stone [KarRC Archive, coll. 8 № 139]. It was more common for them to come, however, by foot or by cart in winter and early spring, in Advent and Lent, and to sing in people’s houses. They would stay with their peasant hosts overnight or even for several days. The housewife who invited her married neighbors in for a spinning “bee” might well choose to ask an itinerant singer in to sing religious verses for them. As a rule the singers visited every house in a village. They were not supposed to go right into the interior of the house, but rather to stay very near the entrance and sit on the bench there that was sometimes known as “the beggars’ bench” (*nishchenskaia lavka*).

Typically the *kaliki perekhozhie* could also be heard singing on the main church festivals as well as other religious holidays, fairs and times of merrymaking [A. S. 1910; Rybnikov 1989: 48-49; Troitsyn den’ 1857]. According to data collected from the peasants’ of Zaonozh’e, the majority of itinerant singers came from Kargopol’. One of the participants in the 1956 expedition to Zaonezh’e remarked that “almost every old woman who heard ‘*stikhi*’ from the Kargopol’ beggars as a child knows them now. In the North in the early twentieth century the métier was very widespread and gave a good living” [KarRC Archive, coll. 79, expedition report 4]. This piece of information corroborates the view of pre-Revolutionary scholars who considered the Kargopol’ area one of the few places in the vast territory of the Russian Empire where the old traditions of *kaliki* singing still survived [Maslov 1905: 13; Miller 1895: 27-28]. Itinerant singers from the Kargopol’ area traveled not only around Zaonezh’e and along the White Sea coast, but also along the Onega river in the neighboring districts that were part of Archangel province [Vereshchagin 1855: 362].

Thanks to I. P. Khrushchev, we can gain some understanding of the way *stikhi* spread among the itinerant singers. In 1866 he traveled along the River Oiat', where he came across a lame beggar, Nikita Bogdanov, who was earning a crust singing religious verses on church festivals in the parishes along the river banks. He was from the area and had started begging in his old age; in order to do this he had learnt about ten religious verses with the assistance of some blind old men he had met in the Alexander Svirskii monastery (in the Lodeinoe Pole district of Olonets province, now Leningrad oblast'). Evidently the *kaliki* would spend a number of days in the monastery. Khrushchev pointed out that the singer "has grasped the essence of *stikh* singing so well that he has complete mastery of it and makes his own variations when he sings" [Khrushchev 1901: 191].

Instances of impoverished peasants performing *stikhi* and *byliny* for alms in their district or even in their own villages are not exceptionally rare for the Russian North. We should note that for those who sang out of necessity there were no restrictions on genres. M. A. Prokhorova from Burakovo recollected that "her grandfather Mikh[ail] Fedorovich Deshagulin lived in poverty and sang various *stikhi* and *byliny* very well ... Mikh[ail] Fed[orovich] sang *byliny* while people worked, at spinning 'bees' and church festivals. People paid him between two and five kopecks for singing a *bylina*, "gave him alms", as M. A. says. He had little to live on, went begging and even so died in poverty" [KarRC Archive, coll. 79 № 366a].

Rybnikov noted the existence of a "transitional" kind of performer, somewhere between the semi-professional itinerant singers and peasant *skaziteli* (narrators).⁽⁹⁾ He presumed that they were mostly itinerant tailors who "have their own place to live and are not really short of money" [Rybnikov 1989: 82]. It seems probable that in case of need both tailors and impoverished peasants could use their performance skills to earn a living.

T. A. Feshov, a peasant from Izhgora, was one such "semi-itinerant" singer. He maintained a household and was not the poorest person in his village, but nevertheless sang *dukhovnye stikhi* and *byliny* and told wondertales all over the district where he lived. He was known as a good narrator and, according to informants from Podberez'e, "made his living by singing" (*kormilsia pesniami*) [KarRC Archive, coll. 8 № 38]. Judging from what the peasants recollect [KarRC Archive, coll. 8 № 8, 21, 35], Tikhon Feshov possessed an artistic streak; he seldom sang at home but enjoyed performing in public. During festivals, surrounded by a crowd of listeners he would perform for pleasure rather than wages; when he wanted to earn money he would go and sing for those in charge of the posting station. T. A. Feshov died in 1930.

Several performers from Kolezhma described the singers whom they often heard when children: "Cross-eyed Van'ka and Oksiukha, they'd be wandering around these parts, together, they were husband and wife... God alone knows where he lived, singing *stikhi* throughout the whole wide world! For his singing people gave him bread or flour, some gave sugar, others tea, various things. When they arrived, they'd ask to spend the night and people would let them in. They came from some place, somewhere far off... Ivan was close on fifty; they were dressed ordinary like: he wore a hat on his head, and she had a headscarf. They didn't have any children... They sang a lot, but I don't remember what now" [KarRC Archive, coll. 145 № 41]. It is probable that this couple lived not too far from Kolezhma, since they visited the village fairly regularly, during every fast [KarRC

Archive, coll. 145 № 36]. They also seem to have been impoverished peasants who went to remote villages, asking for charity but did not fully adopt a vagrant way of life. This supposition receives confirmation from the fact that several informants recalled their names. By contrast the names of genuine *kaliki perekhozhie* who were of no fixed abode or who lived outside Zaonezh'e and Pomor'e have almost never been retained in the memories of their listeners.

This particular reminiscence is notable for one further detail: one of the wanderers mentioned in it is a woman. Most of the evidence about the *kaliki* talks about older men; only two informants have any recollection of vagrant women [KarRC Archive, coll. 8 № 100; coll. 79 № 726]. There may, however, have been more women among the "semi-itinerant" performers. T. M. Bashkirova from Vodlozero told the KarRC collectors that in her childhood she had gone from village to village with her mother, singing songs, and presumably asking for charity [KarRC Archive, coll. 8 № 241]. The famous storyteller M. D. Krivopolenova was another person who wandered around the villages of Northern Russia after she had lost all means of support in her old age, but was reluctant to become a burden on her daughter. Her extensive repertoire certainly included both *dukhovnye stikhi* and *byliny* [Ozarovskaia 1916: 9].

The *kaliki perekhozhie* and the semi-itinerant singers must have continued their wanderings through the Russian North in the 1920s, at least until collectivization. This emerges from an observation about the village of Nigizhma made in a collector's journal during the expedition of 1940 to the Pudozh district: "both the *kaliki* and other singers were invited into wealthy houses. They would perform *byliny* for a crust of bread, and rich peasants were only too eager to listen to them. What the peasants have to tell gives the impression that the itinerant singers had always been there, and local singers like Feshov were also going from village to village [KarRC Archive, coll. 8 № 21]. In response to a question about those who performed *byliny* peasant informants "always mention the *kaliki* and say they knew them" [KarRC Archive, coll. 8 № 21]. Villagers talked about the itinerant singers as a phenomenon that had only recently disappeared. When the kolkhozes were formed, semi-itinerant singers like T. A. Feshov also had to vanish.

Undoubtedly it was the *kaliki perekhozhie* who were chiefly instrumental in the dissemination of religious verses throughout the Russian North. Thanks to their peripatetic existence *dukhovnye stikhi* became an essential part of the settled rural population's repertoire. The influence of the phenomenon of *kaliki* upon the emergence of a semi-itinerant type of singer is also undeniable. Thus in the Russian North of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries we can distinguish three kinds of performers of religious poetry, each interacting closely with the others: the *kaliki perekhozhie*, the semi-itinerant singers and ordinary villagers (predominantly women).

NOTES

1. Research for this article was made possible thanks to the financial support of the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation (Graduate Student Grant, code № A03-1.6-342).

2. The Old Believers split from the main Orthodox Church in the latter part of the seventeenth century, refusing to accept the reforms instituted by the then Patriarch, Nikon.
3. According to the modern administrative division of the Karelian republic these villages are part of the districts of Loukhi (Chernaia rechka), Kem' (Kalgalaksha, Gridino), Belomorsk (Sumskii Posad, Kolezhma, Niukhcha, Lapino, Shueretskoe), Medvezh'egorsk (Kosmozero, Kizhi, Seredka, Shun'ga), Pudozh (Avdeevo, Zaozer'e, Burakovo, Izhgora).
4. Several codices can be found in the Karelian collection in the archives of the Academy Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House) in St Petersburg [Malyshev 1965: 38-52].
5. The *bespopovsty* (priestless Old Believers) are one of the branches of the Old Believer movement, formed after the priests who had been consecrated before Patriarch Nikon's church reform died. Since no bishop had joined the Old Believers, they had no way of consecrating their own priests, hence the name "priestless." The *bespopovsty*, who rejected priests from the official Orthodox Church, instead selected lay preceptors who would administer the sacraments of christening and confession. As early as the eighteenth century the *bespopovsty* had themselves split into dozens of so-called persuasions and unions, one of which was the Pomor'e union (*Pomorskoe soglasie*) with its center on the bank of the Vyg river. The Old Believer community, settled along the Vyg and Leksa rivers, had a considerable impact on the religious life of the Russian North in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries.
6. Approximately forty texts in the KarRC Archive are unattributed.
7. A similar tradition existed in Vologda province [Lobkova 2003: 81].
8. "Fatera" is a distortion of the word "kvartira" (apartment), here meaning the part of a peasant house in which the family lived.
9. P. N. Rybnikov was the first person to record the folklore (mainly *byliny*) and ethnography of Olonets province on a systematic basis. The publication of four issues of The Songs Collected by P. N. Rybnikov [Pesni sobrannye P. N. Rybnikovym], 1861–67, began a new phase in the study of Russian folklore and stimulated folklore collecting in the Russian North.

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